

# THE ADVOCATE

## Statehood effort sees momentum in Washington but divides Congress; Louisiana members give views from opposite sides

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**WASHINGTON** — It may take a second look to notice, but the American flags unfurled along the streets near the U.S. Capitol look a bit different from Old Glory.

The city's leaders have prominently positioned these flags with 51 stars — the extra representing the nation's state-less capital city — to draw attention to a swelling statehood movement that has received little attention outside the Washington metro area but is creating more partisan division in Congress because of the major implications it could ultimately have on U.S. politics.

The D.C. statehood movement on Thursday received its first congressional hearing in more than 25 years.

Such a proposal has never passed the U.S. House or Senate. This time the measure sponsored by D.C.'s Democratic nonvoting delegate, Eleanor Holmes Norton, has 220 co-sponsors and is positioned to at least make it through the Democrat-controlled lower chamber.

U.S. Rep. Cedric Richmond, a New Orleans Democrat who is the only Democratic member of the Louisiana delegation, is one of those co-sponsors.

“Supporting D.C. statehood is simply the right thing to do,” he said. “The practice of taxation without representation exploits disenfranchisement of my colleague, Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton, and everyone she works hard to represent. There are over 700,000 residents of D.C., many of whom are federal employees. It’s past time to give them the return on equity they deserve with a vote in Congress as the 51st state.”

Republicans, meanwhile, generally oppose the proposal so it's unlikely to advance if it makes it to the GOP-controlled Senate.

“This is quite a complex issue,” said U.S. Rep. Clay Higgins, R-Port Barre. “By my understanding and the interpretation of many scholars ... this would require a constitutional amendment.”

For more than three hours Thursday, the House Oversight Committee debated the appropriate process and what's at stake, with little consensus between the opposing sides.

Opponents of the movement generally argue it would take a constitutional amendment, a much higher hurdle than legislative action because an amendment would have to be ratified in 38 of 50 states.

Supporters disagree with that interpretation and have accused opponents of political posturing.

“These are bad faith arguments by people who oppose statehood because they think it will mean two Democratic senators,” Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser said during the hearing.

A Gallup poll released in June found that, across the country, Americans overwhelmingly oppose making Washington D.C. a separate state, with just 29 percent of respondents saying they agree with the statehood movement and 64 percent saying they disagree.

The statehood measure before Congress, assigned as H.R. 51 in support of the movement, would begin the process of establishing the new state of Washington, Douglass Commonwealth represented by two voting senators and one voting House member.

Maps displayed during the hearing show the proposed state would encompass most of the existing city except the major federal government sites, including the U.S. Capitol, White House and several federal buildings and monuments. That area would remain in the federal government's hands to satisfy the Constitution's requirement of a "district" not exceeding 10 miles to serve as the seat of the federal government.

Roger Pilon, the B. Kenneth Simon chair of constitutional studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, testified that there are good arguments on both sides, but he said statehood would take a constitutional amendment because it conflicts with the 23rd Amendment, which was ratified in 1961 to give D.C. residents the right to vote in presidential elections.

“You’ve got to bring the vote about the right way,” he said.

Higgins questioned why supporters were not seeking to meet the higher threshold.

“If this effort was sincere by my colleagues, then there would be an introduction to repeal the 23rd Amendment and to introduce the 28th Amendment,” he said.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, a D.C. native and a Democrat who represents Maryland, said the country has a long history of disagreeing over what territories should be allowed to become states — most recently with arguments that Hawaii and Alaska couldn’t be admitted because they were not contiguous. Texas, Raskin said, was opposed because it was sovereign and considered under control of a “foreign government.”

“All across the country these exact same arguments were made,” he said.

In addition to the flags with an additional star, the Washington city government has held multiple rallies in favor of statehood and recently unveiled a mural supporting the cause.

But experts offered little hope under Congress' current divided government.

“There’s little chance I think we’d all agree, that it would come up in the Senate, much less reach the president’s desk,” Pilon said.